

Suffering and divine impassibility

Jonathan Kopel, PhD^a, Franklyn C. Babb, MD^a, William Hasker, PhD^b, Mark Webb, PhD^c, Carmine C. Gorga, PhD^d, K. J. Oommen, MD^e, Gregory L. Brower, PhD, DVM^a, and Andrew Coleman, MA, MS, MBA^f

^aSchool of Medicine, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, Lubbock, Texas; ^bDepartment of Philosophy, Huntington University, Huntington, Indiana; ^cDepartment of Philosophy, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas; ^dSomist Institute, Gloucester, Massachusetts; ^eCovenant Hospital, Lubbock, Texas; ^fBiola University, La Mirada, California

ABSTRACT

Many theologians believe in the doctrine of divine impassibility: that God does *not* experience pain or pleasure from the actions of creation. However, the question inevitably touches upon our personal relationship and journey with God, a journey involving deep joys and pains. This discussion of divine impassibility relates to the medical profession, which seeks to heal the sick and comfort the dying.

KEYWORDS Clinical practice; divine impassibility; suffering; theology

In the Bible, the emotional life of God is a prominent theme, with many references to God's emotions—from anger and sadness to profound joy and jubilation. Yet theologians have argued extensively as to whether God truly experiences pain or pleasure as we do, or whether God instead remains unchanged in emotional state. Many traditional theologians (“classical theists,” as they have come to be known) affirm the doctrine of *divine impassibility*, which asserts that God does *not* experience pain or pleasure from the actions of beings within creation. If God is truly independent from creation, they assert, then the divine being must remain unchanged. This theological debate unearths deep-seated questions about faith in God. For example: How can God be perfect, complete, and full apart from creation? If God is emotionally affected by what happens in our lives, would this not imply that God needs us in order to be God? As we consider the question of the passibility and impassibility of God, we consider (in part) what it means for God to be God. Many well-informed and intelligent people have tackled these questions and have come to different conclusions.

PROCESS THEOLOGY AND OPEN THEISM

Classical theologians consider it important to emphasize God's difference from creation—God's “transcendence.” But

some more recent theological movements want to understand God as being closer to the world. *Process theology*, a movement that draws heavily on the philosophy of A. N. Whitehead, holds that God literally experiences, along with us, all of our emotions, both positive and negative. God, said Whitehead, is “the great Companion, the fellow-sufferer who understands.” Many find this attractive, but one feature of process theology that may be problematic is its understanding of God's power. This power, they say, is “always persuasive, never coercive.” This means that God can, as it were, *suggest* to us what we ought to do to fulfill God's good purposes, but God can never go beyond this, so as to actually *make something happen* in the world. This limitation on God's power has the advantage of limiting God's responsibility for the evils that exist in the world: what God can't do anything to prevent, God is not responsible for. But while the idea of God's “persuasion” may be attractive, many believers are dissatisfied with the idea of God's power being limited. One process theologian mentioned that his wife had said to him, “I need a God who can get things done!” To which he replied, “Then why in _____ doesn't he?”

Another contemporary theological movement goes under the labels of “open theism” or “the openness of God.”¹ This theology attributes to God the wide range of emotions depicted in Scripture, including sympathy with those who suffer, but has a more traditional idea of God's power and

Corresponding author: Jonathan Kopel, PhD, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, 4202 16th Street, Apartment 601, Lubbock, TX 79416 (e-mail: jonathan.kopel@ttuhsc.edu)

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other attributes. Open theism emphasizes the *relationality* of God with human creatures, noting that the relationships between God and human beings are heavily emphasized in the biblical accounts. Open theism retains a robust realism concerning biblical accounts of God's emotions; classical theism, in contrast, tends to view such biblical emphases as "accommodations"—ways of speaking about God that help limited humans think about God, but which are not strictly accurate. In recent years, open theism has attracted a good many followers, though it is also subject to criticism.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOD IN THE CONTEXT OF HEALTH CARE: TWO VIEWS

These questions inevitably touch upon personal relationships and journeys with God, a journey that involves a checkered path of deep joys and pains. For physicians, the discussion of divine impassibility is highly relevant, as they seek to heal the sick and comfort the dying.

View 1: Jonathan Kopel

As a physician-scientist in training, I see this discussion on divine impassibility as highly relevant to my profession. In few professions do individuals reveal their whole being, physically and spiritually, to a complete stranger as they do in medicine. As a young man, I have come to experience the full spectrum of life through my patients, from the joys of giving birth to a new child, to the struggle of fighting chronic illness or the task of dealing with the end of life. Despite their struggles, my patients have always been open and willing to share their experiences, their hopes, their fears, and their appreciation for being a part of my training. It is a trust and gift that is both deeply moving and inspiring. Their journey is something we share together. We are on a ship sailing into the sea of the unknown, struggling against the ebbs and flows of disease and healing. Where it leads, we often do not know. But it is a journey we share together, helping each other in ways we don't often perceive.

These interactions often remind me that Christ spent an enormous amount of energy healing the sick and dying. His disciples followed a similar model through their ministry across the Roman Empire. On several occasions, Christ was deeply moved by individuals' trust in his ability to heal their loved ones. It is this same path that I tread as a physician-scientist in training.

View 2: Franklyn Babb

As I've practiced medicine for well over 20 years, I have had the opportunity to address the suffering, pain, anger, doubt, and joy that my patients experience with counsel and prayer. I have never considered God to be impassive toward these experiences and emotions. How could I? I have read in the scriptures (as have most of you) that God loves, hates, regrets, enjoys, is moved with compassion, and experiences grief. I also have read in Hebrews 13:8 that God (Jesus

Christ) "is the same yesterday, today, and forever." James 1:17 also comes to mind: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."

I experience God's love, mercy, and grace every time I pray with my patients, which is almost every time that I see them. My patients also experience God's love, mercy, and grace in direct and indirect ways. God moves through me and my emotions to the benefit of my patients and their emotions. Healing comes in many ways, and peace in and through suffering is one of the ways that my patients and I experience not only God's healing but his love, mercy, and grace. God must feel these emotions, just like I and my patients do, right? God, Jesus Christ came to be with us, Emmanuel. In Hebrews 4:15 we read, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." James 1:14 states, "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire." That seems to indicate that Jesus, "tempted in every respect," was "enticed by his own desire" just like we are, but unlike us, without sin.

So, it seems to me that God interacts with us through our emotions and in an emotional way, but that we seem to want to transfer our experience with and understanding of emotions on God. As we in medicine know, transference is not an accurate or healthy way to understand our relationship with another. It appears that divine impassibility and the recent challenges to this theology are affected in the same way. The classical view is that the doctrine of divine impassibility supports the doctrine of divine immutability. God has not changed; we have simply transferred our feelings onto him, which can only diminish him in our eyes, though not in reality.

THE PURPOSE OF PAIN

In medicine, pain and suffering is something we see throughout our training and career. All of us want to avoid pain as much as possible. We prescribe medications to avoid the sensation of pain. But spiritually and emotionally, we all wonder about the purpose of pain. As with Job, senseless pain is the agony that tears at the heart of the human spirit. If our theology describes God as impassible, we can easily become overwhelmed by the pains of this world if God becomes a callous observer of our pain, unmoved by our struggles. However, if God truly is passible and moved by our suffering, then God becomes a participant in our pain and struggles. God feels my pain as I feel it. And, more deeply, God understands it. From a theological perspective, this changes the whole dynamic of life with God. For God shows himself to be willing to be vulnerable by experiencing life with us. God opens himself to our pains and joins us on our journey. We do not feel alone or abandoned by God.

As the mystic Thomas Merton eloquently wrote:

Suffering, therefore, must make sense to us not as a vague universal necessity, but as something demanded by our own personal destiny. When I see my trials not as the collision of my life with a blind machine called fate, but as the sacramental gift of Christ's love, given to me by God the Father along with my identity and my very name, then I can consecrate them and myself with them to God. For then I realize that my suffering is not my own. It is the Passion of Christ, stretching out its tendrils into my life in order to bear rich clusters of grapes, making my soul dizzy with the wine of Christ's love, and pouring that wine as strong as fire upon the whole world.²

Following Merton, suffering is part of the way in which God's love and mercy for our fragile bodies and souls can truly shine. We are so tiny in this world. In all truth, it would be easy for us to get swallowed by the tides of this universe. Yet God holds us in his loving hands and guides us. As children of God, he takes the whole package of our lives with him. God takes our yoke and walks with us, hand in hand. When we are downtrodden and ready to give up, God carries us and heals our souls through the love he places in others as well as through his own imperceptible union of our souls. God uses suffering and our struggles to draw our souls in the Divine's loving embrace. When patients know that God experiences their suffering, that can draw them closer to God. We see God's love as strong enough to experience our pain to provide meaning to move forward and thrive despite our physical ailments. God doesn't take a vacation; God pulls us and binds us to him. It is a union, Christians believe, into which God bound himself through his death and suffering on the cross. As such, God has already faced the worst pains of this universe. And God did so to be in full union and communion with our souls, regardless of the struggles we face in this world. Seen through this trinitarian lens, God is truly full of love.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIANS AND NON-CHRISTIANS

Rather than portraying God as impassable, a God of love is more than willing to become vulnerable to participate and aid us in our pains. Such a perspective can help us model interactions as spiritual encounters with hurt souls. However, divine passibility can only help sufferers if they choose to embrace that perspective; not all Christians do. Believers in God who are not Christians can still consider the implications of thinking that God suffers along with us, but this

idea is raised to its greatest intensity in the Incarnation. Furthermore, theologians and patients of many faith traditions have struggled with these very same issues. Given the common experience of suffering, the topic of divine impassibility invites the theological and spiritual reflections of a broader group and encourages spiritual connection with patients of all faiths. As the Dalai Lama eloquently wrote:

Whether one is rich or poor, educated or illiterate, religious or nonbelieving, man or woman, black, white, or brown, we are all the same. Physically, emotionally, and mentally, we are all equal. We all share basic needs for food, shelter, safety, and love. We all aspire to happiness and we all shun suffering. Each of us has hopes, worries, fears, and dreams. Each of us wants the best for our family and loved ones. We all experience pain when we suffer loss and joy when we achieve what we seek. On this fundamental level, religion, ethnicity, culture, and language make no difference.³

Lastly, this model of God as passible provides patients a comfort that reflects the deep love of God—a love that was so deep God died so that he may be fully in our heart, soul, and mind. Rather than a private affair, suffering becomes a participation between our soul and God, an experience that often deepens and grows our soul to model the love that God wishes to share with all of creation. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer eloquently summarized:

I discovered later, and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world. That, I think, is faith.⁴

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